



Homecoming Issue: Going Back to America

Reaching out to the American citizen community via this has always been a fulfilling way for us to discuss issues that are important to Americans in Syria. It has become even more challenging and important during this period of continuing unrest, and the changing U.S.-Syria bilateral relationship. We are in the process of updating our Travel Warning to take into account the additional difficulties that Americans may face. On August 18, 2011, President Barack Obama called on Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad to step down for the good of the Syrian people. President Obama also signed Executive Order 13582 that same day, which significantly broadens sanctions against Syria in a way that affects average U.S. citizens who continue to live in Syria. **We discuss sanctions on Page 4 of this issue.**

Amidst these changes, we strive to continue to deliver consular services to as wide a range of people as we can. Our priority remains serving U.S. citizens in Syria, and to that end we are still open for all citizenship

services to include passport renewals, issuance of consular reports of birth abroad (CRBAs), and emergency assistance to U.S. citizens.

Our primary concern is the safety and welfare of U.S. citizens in Syria. For years Syria has not adhered to its obligations under the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations to notify us the arrest of U.S. citizens and Syria and provide consular access to its citizens. The Syrian government recently imposed travel limits on consuls, further constraining our ability to carry out our responsibilities under the Vienna Convention. The U.S. Embassy is hard-pressed to safeguard the welfare of Americans in Syria in these circumstances. **We discuss the practical implications for U.S. citizens on Page 5 of this issue.**

We realize that as you are making the decision to return to the U.S., you may have non-U.S. citizen family members you don't want to leave behind. We have worked closely with the Department of Homeland Security to ensure that U.S. citizens in Syria will continue to be able to submit I-130 immigrant visa petitions for their immediate relatives in Damascus. As of August 14, 2011, all petitions filed overseas were supposed to be submitted directly to the DHS, but we have been granted an exemption for Syria due to the continuing unrest that makes departure from Syria urgent. **See Page 8 for a detailed update on submitting immigrant visa petitions in Damascus.**

Some of your family members may be eligible for immigrant visas, but depending on their plans for their future a non-immigrant visa may be more appropriate. In order to help you and your family members make the

right decision for your circumstances, **we explain the immigration process and compare it to traveling on a non-immigrant visa on Page 3 of this issue.**

Families in which the parents are divorced can encounter unique challenges when relocating to the U.S. Child custody laws and practices differ from country to country, and some parents of U.S. citizen children have found themselves stymied in their efforts to bring their children safely home. The U.S. Embassy and the State Department Office of Children's Issues in Washington, DC each plays a role in assisting parents and children. **Our Dear Consul Feature on Page 2 of this issue addressees some questions that have been posed to the Embassy regarding the travel of U.S. citizen minors.**

Families returning to the U.S. are often concerned about how their children will fare in the U.S. education system. Parents of elementary and middle school children wonder how their education level and level of English will match up to their peers, and older students wonder about college applications and testing requirements. **We've dedicated Page 6 of this issue to talk about education-related concerns for those U.S. citizens going home to study.**

Many U.S. Citizens have contacted us requesting information on taxes and social security as they prepare to move home to the U.S. While you can still submit applications for social security cards at the embassy, this process can take up to six months. **We have useful information on taxes and social security cards and benefits on Page 3 of this issue.**

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*******New Feature*******

“Dear Consul...”

Thank you for sending in your questions about services at the embassy going forward. This month’s column addresses questions about minor U.S. citizen issues as families prepare to depart Syria for the U.S.

Q: Dear Consul,

My children are in Syria with myself and their father. We are divorced, and now I'd like to travel back to the U.S. with them. The father refuses to give his consent for their passport renewals and he said if they do get their passports, he will not agree to have their exit stamps processed. Can the Embassy help me?

Stuck in Syria

A: Dear Stuck in Syria,

In order to prevent a parent from taking a child out of the country without the knowledge of the other parent, U.S. law requires the signatures of both parents in order to issue a passport to a U.S. citizen under 16 years of age. In some cases, if it can be shown that the child’s safety is at risk, an exception can be made. However, the parent seeking the exception must be able to explain the risks to the child if a passport is not issued. Regarding the exit permission, this is a requirement of the Syrian government and the U.S. Embassy in Damascus does not have the ability to waive this requirement. You should, however, inform the embassy of the situation and provide us with the father’s name, date of birth, and nationality. If you wish, we would be happy to contact the father to discuss his objections to issuing a passport.

Q: Dear Consul,

I came into the Embassy to renew my passport, and now you won't give it back to me. You say that I owe child support in the U.S., and that you will only give me a passport valid for one-way immediate return to the U.S. Surely given the current situation in Syria you wouldn't deprive an American of his right to travel?

Disgruntled Parent

A: Dear Disgruntled Parent,

The U.S. Embassy will never prevent a U.S. citizen from returning to the U.S. However, in some circumstance, we are prevented from issuing a passport that would permit travel throughout the world. In cases of delinquent child support payments, U.S. law prohibits us from issuing a full-validity passport. The Embassy will provide you with a list of the Health and Human Services offices in each state that deal with child support. If you are able to work with the relevant office in your home state from overseas to resolve your pending child support issue, your passport will be returned and can be renewed for a full-validity pass-

port. If you cannot resolve this issue from overseas, we will cancel your passport and when you can provide us with an itinerary for your return to the U.S., we will issue you a limited validity, direct return passport in order to do so.

Q: Dear Consul,

I am an eleven-year-old U.S. citizen, and my parents and siblings are Syrian. You have told all U.S. citizens to leave Syria, and I would like to do that, except my parents don't have visas. What should we do?

Proud to Be American

A: Dear Proud to Be American,

Thank you for paying attention to our Travel Warning. There are many children like you in Syria who are the only U.S. citizen in their family—usually because they were born during a trip to the U.S. or while their parents were working or studying there. If your family is concerned about your safety and theirs and plan to travel on a temporary basis to the U.S., they should apply for non-immigrant visas. Damascus is not currently processing B1/B2 tourist and business traveler visas, but they may apply at another embassy or consulate (we discussed how to do this in July’s newsletter.) If your family members qualify for another category of non-immigrant or immigrant visa, they may apply for those as well. You will not be able to petition for immigrant visas for your family until you are 21. If you have other family members who are U.S. citizens or permanent residents, your family could decide to send you to live with them in the U.S. While the Travel Warning advises American citizens to leave Syria, it does not say they have to go to the U.S. You and your family could travel to another country until the situation in Syria allows you to return.

Q: Dear Consul,

I am a 15-year-old U.S. citizen, and I was arrested and detained by Syrian security for a week. Now I would like to leave the country and go home to America, but when I went with my father to get my exit stamp I was told there is a travel hold on me. Can you help me get out of the country?

Jailbird

A: Dear Jailbird,

The U.S. Embassy cannot override any legal ruling made by the Syrian government. You should work with an attorney to try to resolve the issue through the judicial system—a list of attorneys is on the embassy website. You can and should keep us informed of your situation and any new developments.

Going Home: Social Security and Taxes

U.S. Citizens submit an application for a social security number at the embassy. However, this process can take up to six months. If you are planning a trip to the U.S., you may find it easier to apply directly with the Social Security Administration there. For U.S. citizens living in Syria who are eligible to receive social security benefits, the embassy is your point of contact if your payments stop or if you need to change your address or contact information. Please email acsdamascus@state.gov or go to <http://www.ssa.gov> for general questions.

Before you return to the U.S., you will also want to be sure you have filed taxes each year. While you may qualify for the exemption for foreign-earned income, property and investments may be subject to taxes. <http://www.irs.gov> has information on late filing and special requirements and exemptions for Americans abroad.



GREEN CARD OR NON-IMMIGRANT VISA: HOW TO TELL WHICH IS RIGHT FOR YOU

Immigrant Visa (Green Card)

An immigrant visa and a “green card,” or “Permanent Resident card,” are two different documents. An immigrant visa is stamped into your relative’s foreign passport and allows them to enter the U.S. as an immigrant for the first time. After entering the U.S., they immediately become “Lawful Permanent Residents” of the U.S. and will automatically receive for a Lawful Permanent Resident card (green card) from the United States Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS).

As the name implies, lawful permanent residents are expected to reside in the U.S. They may lose their Permanent Resident status if they have been outside of the U.S. for a year or more. In order to return and keep their status as lawful permanent residents, they have to submit an application for a returning resident visa and explain why they stayed outside the U.S. for more than the permitted time. If their explanation meets the legal criteria, the consul will authorize the issuance of a returning resident visa. If the consul denies the application, they will have to entire immigration process again. Please visit the “International Travel as a Permanent Resident” section of the USCIS website for more information.

Nonimmigrant Visa

Just because someone qualifies for an immigrant visa doesn’t mean it makes sense to apply to immigrate. Immigrant visa fees are expensive, and if your family member is going to spend so much time outside the U.S. that it will jeopardize their status as a Lawful Permanent Resident, it may be advisable to just apply for a nonimmigrant visa.

If you have family members who are planning to spend less than half of their time in the U.S. but still want to be able to visit you, they may qualify for nonimmigrant visas. The most common category is a B1/B2 visa for tourist or business purposes, though if they plan to engage in any activities not permitted under this type of visa (most full-time study programs, any kind of work in the U.S.) they should apply for the appropriate visa category. There is no penalty for having a pending immigrant visa application—we prefer that people’s travel documents reflect their true purpose of travel, and intending to immigrate in the future does not necessarily affect eligibility for a nonimmigrant visa now.

Sanctions on Syria: How they Affect You

On August 17, 2011, President Barack Obama signed [Executive Order 13582](#), which imposed new economic sanctions on Syria. Previous sanctions restricted the export from the United States of goods to Syria and targeted the assets and investments of specific individuals and entities. The August 17th sanctions are much broader in scope, and they affect all Americans living in Syria.

Under these sanctions, U.S. persons, which includes U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents of the U.S., may not: provide services to Syria; make new investment in Syria; engage in most transactions with the Syrian government, including but not limited to paying business, employment-related, or other fees; import petroleum or petroleum products of Syrian origin into the United States; otherwise transact or deal in petroleum or petroleum products of Syrian origin; and facilitate any transaction by a foreign person that would be prohibited by U.S. sanctions if performed by a U.S. person or within the United States.

The U.S. agency administering these sanctions, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), has issued various authorizations relevant to U.S. persons living in Syria. One of these authorizations (known as "general licenses") allows U.S. persons to pay personal living expenses and to engage in other transactions, including with the Syrian government, that are ordinarily incident and necessary to their personal maintenance in Syria. This includes, but is not limited to, payment of housing expenses, acquisition of goods or services for personal use, payment of taxes or fees to the Syrian government, and purchase or receipt of permits, licenses, or public utility services from the Syrian government. This authorization does not extend to paying Syrian government fees that are business or employment related.

U.S. persons are prohibited from working for the government of Syria in any capacity, and they are prohibited from doing business in Syria, even for a foreign employer. OFAC has issued an authorization permitting, through November 25, 2011, certain transactions to wind down contracts or other agreements involving the government of Syria that were in effect prior to August 18, 2011. The authorization also permits transactions to wind down, divest, or transfer to a foreign person a U.S. person's share of ownership in a pre-August 18, 2011, investment in Syria, or to wind down a pre-August 18, 2011, contractual or other commitment involving the exportation of services to Syria.

Like all U.S. persons, U.S. banks and credit card companies are prohibited from providing services to Syria, drastically limiting U.S. citizens' and residents' ability to use debit cards or credit cards draw out cash from banks or ATM machines, or conduct commercial transactions. Companies like Western Union are also currently not able to transfer funds to Syria without authorization from OFAC. However, OFAC has authorized U.S. depository institutions, U.S. registered brokers or dealers in securities, and U.S. registered money transmitters to process transfers of funds to or from Syria or for or on behalf of an individual ordinarily resident in Syria in cases in which the transfer involves a noncommercial, personal remittance. The authorization excludes such transfers if they are by, to, or through the Syrian government or any other person targeted by OFAC for sanctions. This authorization would allow, for example, someone in the United States to wire funds to Syria for noncommercial, personal purposes using a U.S. bank or an entity like Western Union. OFAC has also authorized the operation of an account in a U.S. financial system for an individual in Syria other than an individual targeted by OFAC for sanctions. Links to these and other general licenses may be found below.

Certain transactions remain exempt from these sanctions. The importation from any country, or the exportation to any country, whether commercial or otherwise, of information or informational materials, regardless of format or medium of transmission is exempt. This exemption does not cover transactions related to information or informational materials not fully created and in existence at the date of the transaction, or to the substantive or artistic alteration or enhancement of informational materials, or to the provision of marketing and business consulting services.

In addition, transactions ordinarily incident to travel to or from any country are exempt.

If, after reading this information, you have any questions about these sanctions, we encourage you to visit the OFAC website and review the information available. They have [general information on sanctions](#) as well as a list of [Frequently Asked Questions](#). Private citizens or businesses wishing to apply for a license to continue operating without violating sanctions will find instructions on the website as well.

This is a list of all OFAC General licenses relating to Syria that have been issued to date:

- [Transactions related to U.S. persons residing in Syria](#)
- [Noncommercial, personal remittances](#)
- [Winding down contracts involving the government of Syria; divestiture of a U.S. person's investments or winding down of contracts involving Syria](#)
- [Provisions of certain legal services](#)
- [Normal service charges in U.S. financial institution accounts](#)
- [Certain services incident to Internet-based communications](#)
- [Exportation or reexportation to Syria of items and related services](#)
- [Syrian diplomatic missions in the United States](#)
- [Official activities of international organizations](#)
- [Operation of accounts](#)

The Vienna Convention on Consular Relations:

The 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, to which both the U.S. and Syria are signatories, is designed to codify mutual understandings between nations about the rights and responsibilities of a consular mission within a host country, and that consular mission's and responsibilities towards its citizens that reside in the host country. The articles of the Convention serve as a worldwide memorandum of understanding between countries about how diplomatic missions and host countries should behave towards one another on matters relating to consular affairs.

Article 36 of the Convention sets out the rights consular officials have to communicate with their citizens wherever they might be. It requires a State to inform consular officials, without delay, if one of their citizens is arrested, and enable the consular official to visit the citizen in prison.

The U.S. Embassy has noted for years that Syria does not abide by the terms of the Convention. The U.S. Embassy is rarely notified promptly of the detention of a U.S. citizen, and to date we have not been granted consular access to any U.S. citizen detained on political grounds. We have also been denied permission to travel to centers of the American community in Syria since mid-July. **We understand that many of you have family situations that preclude your leaving the country, but you must keep in mind that should you or a U.S. citizen family member be detained, the U.S. Embassy may not be able to confirm where you are, ask what charges have been brought against you, or conduct a consular visit to you in prison.**

*****New “*Discovering America*” Feature*****

Studying in the United States



Transferring from one school to another within the same country can be hard for any student—so transferring from one country to another is that much more of a challenge. Here, we’ve tried to pull together some information that will help you with the administrative and psychological sides of moving from a school in Syria to a school in the U.S.

Most states have helpful links on education where you can check on specific programs for a region. Do an online search for [state name] and [education] to see what your state offers/requires. Information about special education services will be available as well.

Pre-K Students

Not all cities and towns have public pre-kindergarten enrollment, though many do and private options also exist. Make sure you remember to bring the following from Syria:

- immunization records, translated
- your child’s birth certificate, passport, social security card, and proof of health insurance

Elementary School Students

Your new school district will probably want to see any report cards, grades, or evaluations your child has accumulated over their years in school in addition to the documents listed above. Your child may be asked to take an English test, and they may be placed in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class if the teacher feels they will benefit from some extra help in English in order to catch up to their peers.

Elementary school is a formative time for children, and educational systems differ from school to school and from country to country. Your child may feel frustrated in some classes and bored in others where he or she al-

ready knows the material. Encourage them to make friends and be patient as they acclimate to this new learning environment.

Middle School

Middle school is a challenging time for students all over the world, as they learn about adult relationships and experience physical and psychological changes. Students moving back to the U.S. during middle school will require plenty of support from their parents and siblings, not only with homework but also with social dynamics. On the administrative side, middle school students should bring translations of all their report cards and records of any international equivalency tests they have taken. Students in 7th or 8th grade should check to make sure that they know what the educational requirements are for entering high school in their school district (i.e. what courses they must have completed.)

High School

High school students will enjoy the U.S. educational system and its element of choice in study. Depending on the high school you choose to attend, you will have elective courses as well as the required courses for graduation from high school. You should be prepared to present your report cards and the results of any international exams you’ve taken in Syria, such as the IB, TOEFL, ACT and SAT tests. Some of these are offered at the American Language Center (see Page 6). For those in 11th and 12th grade, the following site is a great resource for students returning from time abroad who are thinking about applying to college:

<http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c24037.htm>



American Language Center Test Dates

<i>Test</i>	<i>July 2011</i>	<i>August 2011</i>	<i>September 2011</i>	<i>October 2011</i>
ITP	Wednesday, July 13 Thursday, July 28	Wednesday, August 10 Thursday, August 25	Monday, September 12 Wednesday, September 28	Thursday, October 20 Monday, October 31
GRE	N/A	N/A	N/A	Subject Test Saturday, October 15 General Test Saturday, October 22
SAT	N/A	N/A	N/A	Saturday, October 01
TOEFL	N/A	Saturday, August 13	N/A	Saturday, October 15
TOEIC	Wednesday, July 27	Wednesday, August 24	Tuesday, September 27	Sunday, October 30

ITP: Institutional TOEFL

TOEIC: Test of English for International Communication

For further info pls. call the American Language Center at 011- 3327236/ 011- 3337936 (ext. 21 or 22)

**Good News for U.S. citizens and families: U.S. Embassy in Damascus
authorized to continue TO ACCEPT Immigrant Visa Petitions!**

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced that effective August 15, 2011, overseas petitioners will be required to file the Form I-130, Petition for Alien Relative, by mail with the USCIS unless the petitioner lives in a country with a USCIS office.

**Due to current circumstances in
Syria, DHS authorized the embassy**

to all U.S. citizens to submit I-130 petitions for parents, spouses, and unmarried children under 21 at the U.S. Embassy. Please see our website for instructions and more information.

**American Citizen Services
Hours and Contact Information**



**U.S. Embassy Damascus
American Citizen Services
Consular Section
2, Al-Mansour Street, Abu Roumaneh
PO Box 29
Damascus, Syria**

**Phone: 555-555-5555
Fax: 555-555-5555**

**Where liberty dwells, there is my country.
- Benjamin Franklin**